IN THE BREAKING OF BREAD

April 10, 1988

11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Luke 24:13-31

"When Jesus was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them." -Luke 24:30 (RSV)

This, I submit, is the most important Sunday of the year.

By way of introducing that proposal, let me read a page out of a wonderful first novel by Southern journalist, Olive Ann Burns. The title of the novel is Cold Sassy Tree. That's the name of the fictional Georgia town which is the setting. The intriguing characters include: Grandpa E. Rucker Blakeslee and his grandson, Will Tweedy. Grandpa Blakeslee has scandalized Cold Sassy Tree by marrying a beautiful, young hatmaker, Miss Love Simpson, three weeks after his beloved wife died.

Since his hasty and eyebrow-raising marriage, Grandpa doesn't go to church anymore. He and Miss Love have church at home instead. Here is how he describes it to Will Tweedy...

"We sang us some hymns, after which I talked to the Lord a while, tellin' Him about the week, and then I preached the sermon...

"I didn't have no words thought out, you know, so I jest commenced sayin' thangs I been a-thinkin' on lately - 'bout the Virgin Birth and Resurrection and all like thet. I said don't any a-them thangs matter."

Will Tweedy is stunned. "Gosh, Grandpa, you mean you don't think Jesus rose from the dead?"

Grandpa answers, "I'm a-sayin' thet did He or didn't He ain't important, son. What's important is thet when the spirit a-Jesus Christ come down on them disciples later, they quit settin' round a-moanin' and a-tremblin', and got to work. They warn't scairt no more, and the words they spoke had fire in'im. Compared to a miracle like thet, Jesus rollin' back a dang rock and flyin' off to Heaven ain't nothin'." [p. 188]

That's pretty good theology. And that, it seems to me, is what those of us who come back to church the Sunday after Easter are left with.

It is my favorite Sunday. Now that may seem like a very peculiar choice. In fact, there is some thought that for the religious professional, this is a good candidate for least favorite day - along with the Sunday after Christmas, Labor Day, and those occasions in January when the temperature stands at a frigid 10 degrees, the wind is at about 25 knots and the Bears are in the playoffs -- kickoff at 11:30.

The trouble with this Sunday is what do you do for an encore? What do you do a week after a day which began with a hundred or so of us standing on the shore of Lake Michigan, at the very moment the sun appeared, casting its rays across the water, singing with one clear trumpet accompaniment, Jesus Christ is Risen Today; and then later, the church filled twice, and flowers and trumpets and heroic music and the Hallelujah Chorus?

We plan and prepare and point to Easter all year long and in the season of Lent we are single-minded about it.

This is known in some quarters as "Low Sunday," a good day for the professional practitioners to take off and rest our weary bodies and cool down our over-heated spirits. It remains my favorite, however.

It's not that I don't love Easter. What could be better than being the minister of a church like this on Easter morning? I dissent from that school of thought which belittles those who come only on Easter. What better day to come? You know, of course, about the preacher who began his Easter sermon by wishing his congregation "Merry Christmas" because he knew he wouldn't see many of them until the next Easter. Not me... If you only worship God once a year, by all means do it on Easter morning.

I love Easter, but this - the first Sunday in Eastertide - Low Sunday - is my favorite.

The problem, you see, is that when you celebrate as exuberantly as we did last week, you might come to the logical conclusion that Easter is about an event that happened two thousand years ago. Perhaps more important than the Trojan Wars or the assassination of Julius Caesar, but like them - history. The fact is that if we focus solely on the event of resurrection, pondering the historicity of the accounts - what happened, where it happened and when it happened, and who said what to whom - we may have a lot of pondering to do. One thing we will not have done is to hear the Good News - or confront the theological genius of Christianity.

What Easter is about is the stunning suggestion that God lives - that the Creator of all that is, lives among us. The Risen Christ is the power and love and justice and healing of the Creator God. God is not closeted in some corner of the universe, seated on a throne invisible above the clouds, or even in the complex formulas of philosophy and theology, but in the world, in the stuff of ordinary life. That's what all the shouting was about last Sunday.

There aren't many consistencies in the New Testament resurrection accounts. Each Gospel tells it differently. The one thing the accounts

are consistent about is that this empty tomb didn't convince anybody. All the empty tomb did was scare to death the people who discovered it. Nor

did stories about the empty tomb convince anybody. The people in the narratives are astonished, confused and very frightened. What transformed

them from scared fisherman into courageous heralds of a new kingdom was not compelling logic, but a powerful personal experience that they called the Risen Christ. What brought Simon Peter from the shame of denying that he even knew the man to martyrdom, was not a ten second look into an empty hole in the side of a hill - but experiences - undeniable experiences of power and love and forgiveness and rebirth.

How did it happen? For two of them it happened in the most unlikely setting you could think of... on a road - the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus.

The story is wonderfully human. Do you remember how it was, after the funeral of someone you loved very much? How incongruous it seemed that life was still going on: buses were running, stores were open, people were moving about - as if nothing had happened. Didn't they know?

They had been hiding in that locked room for two days and nights and now, on the third day after the appalling disaster of Friday, two of them could stand it no longer. As the two walked they were joined by a third man. They told him about the events of the prior two days. They didn't know him, but they persuaded him to eat the evening meal with them at Emmaus. There - at table, breaking bread, in an act reminiscent of a supper they had shared a few nights before - they recognized him.

Please notice the wonderful literary details of this finely human story. Two people who knew him before failed to recognize him now. Notice that part of the reason they didn't recognize him is that they didn't expect to see him there.

The writer of this story, it seems to me, wants the reader to see that the resurrection is not an isolated historical peculiarity - a kind of religious shrine to which one can keep returning year after year. The Gospel writer wants us to focus on a strange and wonderful reality of God's love still present - still turning the world upside down.

In Olive Ann Burn's novel Will Tweedy is stunned at his Grandpa's words about the Resurrection...

"What did Miss Love say to that, Grandpa?" (I was real excited.) "Nothin'. I didn't let her interrupt me agin. I said thet same miracle is still a-happenin', right here in Cold Sassy, in July of nineteen aught-six. A crippled person or an invalid, or the meanest thief or the most despairin' misfit, why, if'n he can ketch aholt of the spirit of Jesus Christ, he can quit bein' scairt and be like risin' up from the dead. Once his soul gits cured, no matter what his body's like, why, he can start a new life." [Ibid, p. 188]

On this day, the word is that the power and relevance of Christianity is not in the memory of an event that happened 2,000 years ago - regardless of how precious that memory is, or regardless of the glory and power of the celebration. The essence of it is not history, but experience. Not then - but now.

Did you notice how those two at Emmaus had to see things differently in order to recognize him. A good working definition of religious conversion is learning to see things differently: learning to see the holy in the ordinary. If you have seen the Georgia O'Keeffe exhibit, you have experienced how the power of the transcendent can be expressed in ordinary objects. Vincent VanGogh painted pictures full of spiritual power and mystery. None of them are about "religious" subjects, but olive trees and starry nights and sunflowers and iris... Sometimes to see something is to know it for the first time even though you've been thinking about it all your life. The passion and poignancy of Romeo and Juliet can be described, told in words, but when Juliet covers the dead body of her beloved and tries frantically to place his limp arms around her, people in the ballet audience weep. It is seeing truth.

Last Sunday evening, at the end of a very long day, I came to Vespers. I had thought about, intellectualized about, used all the academic devices and literary metaphors I could find to talk about the resurrection. At Vespers a liturgical dancer expressed - in dance - the Gospel reading from John, and all who were there knew about the resurrection in a very eloquent way.

Bruce Buursma, in his last column as Religion Editor for the Tribune last week said it beautifully. He referred to a sermon he heard in this church by Elam Davies. Buursma wrote:

"There are moments when even religious writers find themselves transfixed by something said or done in the name of God." And then he illustrated:

"Eyebrows can arch. There can be the wordless eloquence of a man who tends the victims of AIDS... and the woman who teaches children of Indochinese refugee camps,..." [Chicago Tribune, 4/1/88]

The essence of it is not memory or history, but experience. The ultimate criteria for religion - for sermons, beliefs, rituals, gestures - is a blunt question: "So What?" "Does it matter?" "Does it make a difference?" "Does it have anything to do with the life we actually live with the secular as well as the religious?"

And on this day the word is yes. God's love lives among us. Death itself does not defeat it. In the world, in the stuff of life, in the breaking of bread, there is heart-filling beauty and soul-stirring truth.

No one writes about it more eloquently than Frederick Buechner. Speaking at a seminary graduation - to men and women about to become clergy - he said:

"Again and again Christ is present not when, as priests, you would be apt to look for him but precisely where you would not have thought to look for him in a thousand years. The great preacher, the sunset, the Mozart Requiem, can leave you cold, but the child in the doorway, the rain on the roof, the half-remembered dream, can speak of him and for him with an eloquence that turns your knees to water." [A Room Called Remember, p.149]

Or in the breaking of bread. It is no accident I think, that Luke sets the good news of God's love beside occasions when people are eating and drinking together. I think he has done that - preserved this story for us, in fact - to suggest that the Risen Christ is present in the ordinary, daily activities and rituals of our life. I think, in addition, he wanted to suggest that Christ is present particularly when we are hungry... physically and spiritually.

It is precisely when we know our need for truth, for clarity, for love, for acceptance, for encouragement - that the Risen Christ comes. It is, I think, only when we have been absolutely devasted by grief, when we stand in the darkest valley of the shadow of death that the familiar words - "I will fear no evil, for thou art with me" come alive. It is, I think, only when we know our guilt - that the power of forgiveness comes alive. It is, I think, only when we know emptiness and boredom and staleness - that the resurrected Christ appears... It is precisely when we are painfully aware of our hunger, that bread is broken and our eyes are opened and we recognize him.

There are actually two different ideas of communion in the Christian tradition. The first, and by far the most familiar theology of the sacrament focuses on the Last Supper.

"This is my body broken for you. Do this in memory of me." It is a memorial feast. The mood is somber.

There is another motif. Equally ancient. Equally important, theologically. It has its roots in this table at Emmaus, where the Risen Christ was present. When in the breaking of bread "their eyes were opened and they recognized him."

All year long, in our observances of communion we try to keep those ideas together. But mostly, and appropriately, we remember his death on our behalf.

Today - first Sunday of Eastertide - the mood is different. Christ is alive. You and I live in a new world.

God's love is there on the road to Emmaus and in the city streets and dirty alleys. God's passionate love for the world is there in the agony and ecstacy, the tragedy and the heroism of the human story. God's love lives in the ambiguity of the Middle East, and the tireless efforts of peace makers. God's love is in Northern Ireland, Cabrini-Green, Northwestern Hospital, the Chicago Housing Authority, Fourth Presbyterian Church, and in your life.

God's love lives. Expect it. Anticipate the healing, life-giving love of God in the very stuff of your life.

That's what this Sunday is about. It is easily missed, actually. The two who walked to Emmaus with him almost didn't realize it. It was at table - to which he invites us - that "he took bread and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened and they recognized him."

Amen.